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Revelation 4:1-11

Tenth Message

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BEHIND THE VEIL

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

On Friday I returned from ten days in Europe where I visited family and friends. Everywhere I went it was not long before conversation turned to the war in Iraq. As a European resident in America, people were especially interested in my opinion, especially my opinion of President Bush. The president has a clear vision. He sees the world in black and white. There is the way that the world is and the way that the world ought to be. In the world as it is, evil is afoot, harbored by an axis of evil, terrorists are able to strike not only at American targets overseas but now at America itself, and a tyrant rules in Baghdad. The world as it is must give way to the world as it ought to be. President Bush is willing to throw the considerable resources of the USA to ensure this transition. Bush also sees the nations of the world in black and white: they are either with the USA or against the USA. There is no middle ground. Bush has little patience for endless debate, little acceptance of the concept of just learning to live with the world as it is. This polarized view of the world in turn polarizes the people of the world. There are those who agree with the president's vision and with his leadership. But there are others who view him as a great threat.

It is not my role to endorse Bush or condemn him, nor to tell you whether to support the war in Iraq or to oppose it. What I do want to say is that this way in which President Bush seems to look at the world is very helpful in understanding the book of Revelation. According to Revelation, the world is a particular way because evil is afoot. There is an axis of evil opposed to the purposes of God. But certain things must happen so that this world becomes the way it ought to be. The book contains strong warnings not to accommodate to the way things are. Revelation contains a rich cast of characters, but there are only two sides. All the characters are either with God or against God. There is no middle ground.

Revelation presents the world in black and white. Our vision too easily becomes clouded so that we see the world in gray. Revelation is vital for today, not because it gives a blueprint for Armageddon—I don't think it does—but because it refreshes our vision. In a world of gray there are no lines; the boundaries have become fuzzy. Revelation redraws the lines so that we can once again see the world in black and white. Revelation redraws the lines to distinguish the way things are from the way things must be. It redraws the lines to distinguish those who are with God from those who are opposed to God. Revelation is not a friendly book for politicians who have learnt to accommodate themselves to the shifting whim of public opinion. But it is an essential book for those who want to have vision, for those who want to see clearly in a gray world.

The way things are and the way things must be

We return to our studies in the book of Revelation, resuming with chapter 4.

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me

like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." (4:1 NIV)

This book is "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John" (1:1). The revelation starts with God, for all things start with him. The revelation is both given to and is about the Lord Jesus Christ. He in turn entrusts the message to one of his angels who mediates and explains it to John, for he is unable to comprehend the message on his own. Because of his role, this angel, one of many in the book, is called the interpreting angel. In turn, John entrusts the revelation to writing and sends it to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. There it is read out to each assembled church. The angel, John, the reader and the listeners all constitute the servants of God.

The interpreting angel summons John, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." This phrase, "what must take place" is a crucial one, used four times in the book. As we have seen, the whole book is "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" (1:1). At the end of the book, the interpreting angel reminds John that this is the purpose of the book, "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (22:6).

In calling him to a prophetic ministry, Jesus instructs John, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later" (1:19). John is to write the things which he has seen, the visions he has been shown. These visions contain two elements: the things which are now, and the things which will take place later (or better, "the things which are about to take place after these"). That is a good summary of the book of Revelation. There are certain things which are now; the world is a particular way. Why is the world the way it is? We're not given the answer until chapters 12-13, where John is shown the axis of evil: the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. These three are in rebellion against God and wage war against God's people on earth, those who bear faithful witness to Jesus.

But the world will not always be as it is now; other things are about to take place. These events are always considered to be imminent, even though 1900 years have passed since this book was written. What are these things which must soon take place? The angel summons John up to heaven to show him. The things which he shows him are recorded in chapters 4-16. The most familiar features of these chapters are the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, which represent God's judgments upon those who are opposed to him. These judgments build in intensity until the seventh bowl when it is proclaimed "It is done!" (16:17)—the same verb as in the phrase "the things which must happen." With the pouring out of the seventh bowl, these things have happened.

After the interpreting angel has shown John these things, another angel twice more gives John a similar summons: "Come, I will show

you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters" (17:1); "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (21:9). These two summons further clarify the things which must take place: Babylon, the prostitute, the city that is autonomous from God, the residence of the inhabitants of this world, must fall to make way for New Jerusalem, the bride, the city of God, the residence of the people of God. There are only two cities, but there is not room for both in the world as it must be. One city must fall so that the other can fill the whole cosmos.

The book of Revelation builds to two climaxes, each announced with a proclamation. Midway through the book, when the seventh trumpet is blown, the cry goes up, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). At the end of the book, after the three members of the axis of evil (the dragon, the beast and the false prophet) and everything else opposed to God are thrown into the lake of fire, the cry goes up, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). That is the glorious message of the book of Revelation.

Today we enter the central section of Revelation, a set of visions which runs through chapter 16. Perhaps many of you are impatient for me to get onto "the good stuff": the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. These are the most familiar visions of this central set of visions, but they are not the most important visions. They represent the things which must happen, but they do not explain why these things must happen. Did you notice that little word "must" in verse 1? It is used seven times in the book, surely not an accidental number.

The first seal is not opened until chapter 6. The visions which come before it, the visions which constitute chapters 4-5, are the most important visions of the section, for they explain that little word. They explain why the world will not remain as it is, why the axis of evil will not prevail, why the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, why Babylon must fall to make way for the New Jerusalem, and why in the end the dwelling of God is with his people. They explain why without any shadow of a doubt these things must be.

The Throne

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. (4:2-3a)

The first thing that John sees in his vision into heaven is a throne. Seen here for the first time, this throne is a dominant feature of the book. Forty times John refers to this throne. Everything in the next few verses is described in relation to this throne. No fewer than eight participial phrases refer to the throne: upon the throne is someone sitting, around the throne is a rainbow, around the throne are twenty-four other thrones, from the throne come thunder and lightning, in front of the throne are seven lamps, in front of the throne is the crystal sea, in the middle of the throne and around the throne are the four cherubim. This throne is the center of the universe.

The throne is occupied. Dorothy and her three companions journeyed to the Emerald City to request help from the wizard of Oz. When they got there they were terrified by his powerful voice and awesome presence. But when Toto pulled back the curtain, they found that "the great and powerful wizard of Oz" was just humbug;

his imposing presence was a smoke and mirrors act. Behind the veil was an imposter. Behind the veil of heaven, John sees no imposter. He sees God himself. But John doesn't call him God. He refers to him as "the one seated upon the throne." In fact, this is John's usual way of referring to God. He says more about him by calling him "the one seated upon the throne" than by calling him "God."

There is another throne, that of the axis of evil: the dragon has a throne which he gives to the beast (13:2). The whole world is deceived by the false prophet into worshiping the beast who sits upon this throne (13:12). But Revelation does not allow us to consider the world as bipolar. There are not two equal and opposite poles to the cosmos. We are never allowed to consider Satan as equal and opposite to God, or the beast as equal and opposite to the Lamb. The throne of the dragon and the beast is counterfeit, and the one sitting upon it is an imposter. At the moment of God's choosing he will effortlessly overthrow the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. The cosmos is monopolar. At the monopole stands a throne and the one seated upon it. That is why the things shown to John must happen. The existence and occupation of that throne is the guarantee that they will happen.

Around the Throne

John next describes what he sees around the throne:

A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. (Rev 4:3b-8a)

The rainbow which John sees around the throne is part of the dazzling radiance of God, radiance which John likens to jasper and carnelian. John is borrowing from Ezekiel's vision of God, where the prophet, unable to adequately describe what he sees, concludes, "Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezek 1:28).

The rainbow is probably also a reminder of God's covenant with Noah and with every living creature upon the earth that "never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9:11). The rainbow reminds us that God's goal is not a destroyed earth but a restored earth. It reminds us that God will keep this world functioning until the things which are have given way to the things which must be.

The crystal sea probably serves a similar purpose as the jasper and carnelian, and as the emerald-like rainbow. It forms part of the radiance of the enthroned God. Ezekiel saw under God's throne "what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome" (Ezek 1:22). Moses saw under God's feet "something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself" (Exod 24:10).

Next John sees twenty-four thrones arranged around the throne. These are the thrones of the twenty-four elders. The vision of God in his heavenly throne room surrounded by his heavenly court or divine council is common in the Old Testament. The number twelve often signifies the people of God. Twice times twelve would indicate the people of God in both testaments, Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church whose true members together constitute the one people of God.

From the throne comes thunder and lightning, imagery borrowed from Exodus 19, where thunder and lightning heralded God's coming to earth:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. (Exod 19:16-19)

This thunder and lighting recurs three more times in Revelation, with the seventh seal (8:5), with the seventh trumpet (11:19) and with the seventh bowl (16:18). Each is more intense than the previous. Each signifies a theophany, God's coming to earth. Each is a reminder that the terrible judgments which come upon the earth proceed from the very throne of God. They are not random events in a random universe. They are deliberate events orchestrated by the sovereign God who occupies the throne at the center of the universe.

In front of the throne are seven lamps, representing the seven spirits or seven-fold spirit of God. In addition to the significance of the number seven, this is perhaps also a reference to Isaiah's seven-fold description of the spirit: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD" (Isa 11:2).

Finally John sees four living creatures gathered around the throne. The imagery is again borrowed from Ezekiel's vision of God, when he saw "what looked like four living creatures" (Ezek 1:5). These are later identified as cherubim (Ezek 10:20). As we have come to expect by now, John does not slavishly borrow from the Old Testament, but here, as everywhere, he modifies the imagery. Each of Ezekiel's four living creatures has four faces; each has the face of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle. But each of John's cherubim is like only one of these creatures. Cherubim are God's throne attendants, present in his sanctuary. They were present in the garden of Eden. They were symbolically present in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and in the temple. John now sees them in heaven, in God's true sanctuary, of which the tabernacle and the temple were earthly copies.

Ezekiel's cherubim had four wings apiece. Each of John's has six, the same number as the seraphim that Isaiah saw in his vision of the Lord (Isa 6:1-4). This blending of Ezekiel's cherubim and Isaiah's seraphim allows John to introduce the song sung by the seraphim: "Holy, Holy, Holy."

Worship of the One Seated Upon the Throne

Next John describes the activity around the throne. He sees first the cherubim then the elders offering their worship to the one who

sits upon the throne. The cherubim acclaim God as holy; the elders acclaim him as worthy.

1. The worship of the cherubim: God is holy

Day and night they never stop saying:

**"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come." (4:8b)**

The cherubim offer up their ceaseless praise. They sing the same song as the seraphim whom Isaiah saw singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:3). This song has been enshrined into the liturgy of synagogue and church as the *qedushah* (Hebrew, "holy thing") of the synagogue, the *trisagion* (Greek, "thrice-holy") of the Orthodox Church, and the *sanctus* (Latin, "holy") of the Catholic Church. Perhaps some of you have sung the *sanctus*, either in Catholic services or in a choral production. Many composers have made beautiful arrangements of this piece. I have an entire CD of different settings of the *sanctus*. Here's what the liner notes say: "Though the 'Sanctus' is part of the Roman Catholic Mass, its glorious beauty and message of peace belong to all races and creeds."¹ Nothing could be further from the truth. The proclamation that God is holy makes mere creatures fall on their faces. The proclamation that God is holy rules out all other creeds.

Holiness means that something is other, that it is extraordinary, out of the ordinary. In Rudolph Otto's classic formulation, the holy God is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery which makes one tremble yet fascinates. God is a mystery. He cannot be fully comprehended. Neither Ezekiel nor John can describe God. God is a mystery who makes one tremble. Isaiah, Ezekiel, John all fall down when confronted with God. There is a radiance and brilliance about God that makes one fall down before him. As the hymn says, "Tis only the brightness of light hideth thee."² Yet God is also a God who fascinates. Created beings are drawn to him, to worship their creator. Rev 22:4 shows that a time is coming when God will no longer be hidden, for his servants "will see his face" when they have been rendered holy also.

2. The worship of the elders: God is worthy

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

**"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being." (4:9-11)**

The twenty-four elders respond to the lead of the cherubim. They strip themselves of their crowns, abase themselves, and offer their worship to the one seated upon the throne, to the one who lives for ever and ever.

The elders acclaim their Lord and God as worthy. This is almost certainly a polemic against Domitian, the Roman emperor at the time John wrote this book. Domitian styled himself as *dominus et deus*, "Lord and God." He built a large palace in Rome, complete with a magnificent throne room. Throughout the empire, the imperial cult acclaimed him as worthy. But Domitian, like the wizard of Oz, is humbug; his magnificence is a smoke and mirrors show. Rev-

elation 4 is designed to refurbish the imagination of God's people in Asia and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. They were surrounded by people who acclaimed Domitian as their lord and god, and proclaimed him worthy. That is the seen world. But John, and those to whom he writes, are given a vision into the unseen world, where they are shown the one who is their true Lord and God, the one who is truly worthy to receive glory, honor and power. To see beyond the seen world to the unseen requires revelation.

The number three features prominently in the worship. The cherubim acclaim God as thrice-holy. They offer him glory, honor and thanks. The elders offer him glory, honor and power. In the next chapter this will be intensified to a seven-fold attribution: "power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise" (5:12). This three-yea seven-fold attribution to God and to the Lamb implies that all worship belongs to them.

Thoughts about worship

Revelation is a book about worship. I will never tire of saying this. Yet most people are unaware that worship is a dominant feature of the book. I will close with three comments about worship as seen in Revelation.

1. Worship centers

The book of Revelation shows worship to be highly focused. It is focused on the throne and its occupant. Upon that throne sits one who is both holy and worthy. Throughout the book we see an ever-wider circle gathered around that throne to worship. Worship should re-orient us. Throughout the week we lose our focus, other things compete for our attention, idols arise clamoring for us to acclaim them worthy, we become fragmented. Worship centers us again upon God. It defragments us and reorients us. Sadly too many of our songs are centered on the wrong person, upon me rather than upon God.

2. Worship gathers

The book of Revelation also shows worship to be a communal activity. The cherubim, elders, angels and saints who gather around the throne are not an assembly of individuals. They are a community, the servants of God gathered to acclaim their sovereign master. We are here today as part of God's family, a family that stretches around the world and through time. When I sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty" it is not just me singing that. I am singing the same song sung by the seraphim seen by Isaiah, sung by the cherubim seen by John, sung in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, English and countless other languages throughout the world and through time. Sadly too many of our contemporary songs are written in the first person singular, not the first person plural. No longer is it "Holy God we praise thy name, Lord of all we bow before Thee." Now it is "I just want to praise you."

This does not mean that we all must sing exactly the same song all the time. Throughout Revelation, the worship is antiphonal. First one group sings, then another. The cherubim sing, then the elders, then the angels, then all creation. This has helped me understand the role of choirs and worship teams. If the worship team is doing all the singing, and I am merely a spectator, then it is not gathered worship. But it is quite acceptable for a worship team or a choir to offer its contribution if this stirs the congregation to add its own voice to the worship. The end result should be that all of the saints gathered below join all of the saints gathered above in adding their voices to those of the cherubim, elders and angels gathered around the throne. Together we all acclaim that God is holy and that God is worthy.

3. Worship responds

Worship in the book of Revelation is always responsive to the being and deeds of God and of the Lamb. The cherubim worship because they see God. The elders worship because the cherubim proclaim him to be holy. For me to worship I first have to see God. I have to be given something to respond to. I must be shown the being and deeds of God. We gather on Sundays not just to worship. We gather to have our vision refreshed, to have our eyes opened wide to see God enthroned in glory. The worship can happen only when our eyes are opened afresh to see God. We must be given a reason to worship and praise. It is only when I see God as revealed in his being and his deeds that I will fall down and sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy," and "Thou art worthy."

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim 1:17)

1. *Sanctus: Meditations for the Soul* (Archiv, 1996).
2. Walter C. Smith, *Immortal, Invisible* (1876).

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